



# Connected By Threads

How generations of disabled women artists  
have found a voice through textiles

By Gill Crawshaw



# Introduction

Textiles and needlework have long been part of the fabric of disabled women's history. From the workhouse and asylum through to occupational therapy in hospitals and day centres, and even in the home, needlework has been an activity intended to keep disabled women busy and quiet. But some women found a voice in their sewing. Far from being silenced, textiles gave them the freedom to express themselves in a way that they could control.

Today's disabled women artists are continuing this legacy. They are embracing the possibilities of textile materials and techniques while at the same time subverting them to confound expectations and as a way to protest. Many use traditional techniques, learned in childhood, which connect them to previous generations or to their community. Like those women in workhouses and asylums, they find textiles to be well suited for communicating complex, sometimes difficult, ideas. They are drawn to textiles because they are versatile, portable and include materials and equipment that are affordable and close to hand.

Connected over many years, disabled women have blended their creativity, textile skills, and understanding of materials with insight and experience. The art which emerges shows their resistance, resourcefulness and resilience.

Front cover image: Lorina Bulwer, Untitled, no date. Woollen yarn on re-used cotton fabric.

Image description: Horizontal strips of different fabrics joined together and densely covered with stitched writing in block capitals.

Photo courtesy of Thackray Museum of Medicine





## Faye Waple, Reductivism, 2014

Cotton thread on canvas

### Image description:

Machine-embroidered irregular lines and shapes on a dark grey canvas background. In the bottom half, two lumpy vertical lines branch and curve outwards at their tops. Above these curves are a few sweeping lines and smaller shapes, in red and yellow thread, dotted about like islands in a grey sea.

## Mary Frances Heaton, untitled, no date

Linen with cotton thread

Photo courtesy of the Mental Health Museum

### Image description:

Rectangular sampler, displayed vertically. White words stitched within geometric shapes on a dark grey background. Prominent are the words: piano & guitar, music mistress aged 48, Prince Lieven, Wakefield, Doncaster. Various dates are included, from 1831 to 1849. Other decorative elements include sprigs of leaves and a clock face.







**Raissa Kabir नील. Nil. Nargis. Blue.  
Bring in the tide with your moon...,  
2019**

Performed at Cove Park, Scotland

Photo: Ashanti Harris

**Image description:**

The artist walks along the water's edge on a pebbly beach, pulling a set of red threads in one hand. The threads' weighted ends rest in the water. Only the bottom half of the artist's body is in shot, wearing red and white clothes and ghungroos - ankle bells.



This essay focuses on the lives and work of disabled women in the UK, many in the north of England. There are other striking examples of disabled women's textile work from around the world.

- + Agnes Richter (1844-1918) is remembered for her embroidered jacket, covered with autobiographical text, made while detained in institutions in Germany.
- + Judith Scott (1943-2005) in the United States gained worldwide recognition for her abstract sculptures which cocoon objects in wrapped thread.
- + Noriko Tanaka (1979-) is one of the many notable Japanese disabled artists working in textiles. Her meticulously embroidered cloth resembles woven tapestry.

These are just a few examples. There would doubtless be more, but the delicate nature of textile materials means that many items have not survived. Besides which, the artistic work of disabled women, including those in institutions, was rarely recognised or valued, no-one thought to keep it. So the pieces that remain are especially precious.



## Hayley Mills-Styles, Ghosts in Time, 2014

Rayon thread embroidery

### Image description:

Machine embroidery created without a backing cloth. The stitches form shapes and texture on their own. The overall impression is of a delicate, lacy fabric, similar to material that has degraded over time. But a few patches are more solid: the grey outline of a square in the foreground, then behind it a rust-coloured ring, like the stain left by a mug on a table, plus a few drips beside it.







**Mary Frances Heaton, Untitled (Letter to Queen Victoria),  
around 1851-52**

Linen with cotton thread

Photo courtesy of the Mental Health Museum

**Image description:**

A neatly embroidered letter, black thread on white, text as follows:

Our Most Gracious Sovereign The Queen Victoria Is most respectfully petitioned to affix her Royal Seal to this sampler in token of approbation thereof. Mrs Henden Widow, nurse for more than 10 years in the ward where Mrs Seymour is confined – on seeing her for the first time July 1841 was much struck by her appearance and described her as “fair to look upon” etc etc in a way that was most amusing, as well as complimentary, one step leading to another, Mrs Seymour informed her that once upon a time a certain noble Lord had been of the same opinion. And finally in acknowledgement of numerous trifling obligations, making up in number what they want in weight, Mrs S. Promised her a present of 27L.



# Embroidery in the asylum

Mary Frances Heaton (1801-1878) and Lorina Bulwer (1838-1912) both took up needlework while detained in asylums. They used traditional embroidery methods to make remarkable, original objects. The samplers and scrolls made by these two women have not only retained, but increased, their power and fascination for modern audiences. Their voices come through so clearly and authentically in their work that people are drawn in and want to find out more.

*“I wish the vicar would submit to arbitration my claim against him for music lessons given to his daughter, regularly, twice a week.”*

Mary Heaton was committed to West Yorkshire Pauper Lunatic Asylum, Wakefield in 1837. She had caused a disturbance during a church service, demanding to be paid for music lessons she had delivered to the local vicar's daughter. For this she spent decades in the asylum, where she later took to embroidery to share her feelings and vent her anger. Her embroidered samplers include an account of the events leading up to her committal. Several of them are now in the collection of the Mental Health Museum in Wakefield.



*“What have I Miss Lorina Bulwer to do with the above defrauders I Miss Lorina Bulwer have not had a farthing of my money my money is my own and it will never be.”*

Lorina Bulwer was a needleworker whose brother put her in an asylum in Great Yarmouth when she was 55. It was here that she created a number of embroidered scrolls expressing her anger at her situation. The scrolls are neatly and densely embroidered, and read as if they are perhaps a stream of consciousness. They are worked in wool on a range of re-used cotton fabrics.

Three of Bulwer’s embroidered scrolls have been discovered, one is held in the collection of the Thackray Museum of Medicine in Leeds (a former workhouse), the others are in Norwich Castle Museum.



## Lorina Bulwer, Untitled (detail), no date

Woollen yarn on re-used cotton fabric

Photo courtesy of Thackray Museum of Medicine

### Image description:

Horizontal strips of different fabrics joined together and densely covered with stitched writing in block capitals. This detail includes around fifty lines of text and there are even words running sideways along the border.

The full transcript of the entire scroll is available at:

<https://frayedtextilesonthedge.files.wordpress.com/2013/06/lorina-transcription-thackray.pdf>





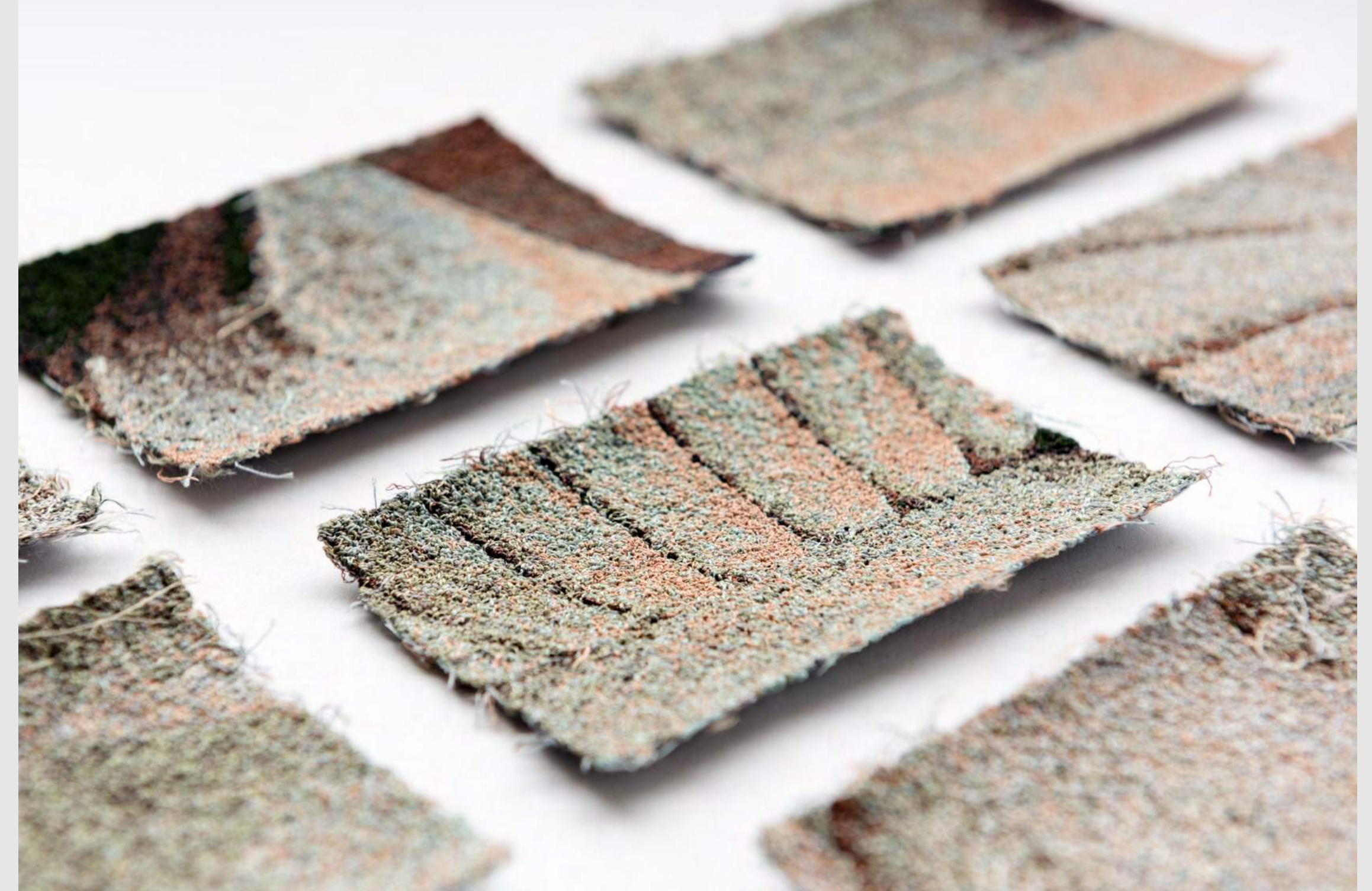


### Hayley Mills-Styles, Marking Time, 2014

Rayon thread embroidery on vintage cotton tray cloth

#### Image description:

A tray cloth with a brown irregular ring, as if left behind by a hot drink spilt from a mug. The ring is machine embroidered, dense stitching becoming single lines of stitch here and there at the edges.



### Hayley Mills-Styles, Recording Time, 2014

Rayon thread embroidery

#### Image description:

Machine embroidery, so dense as to make solid fabric. There are half a dozen rectangles, a few inches long, arranged in neat rows. Grey, black and rust-coloured thread give a dusty appearance. The middle rectangle is in clear focus and has a pattern of gentle ridges, like upholstery.



# Contemporary narratives

Hayley Mills-Styles is a textile artist who sees a strong connection between her work and that of Bulwer and Heaton, not just in the use of embroidery but also in storytelling and personal narratives.

*“My own practice uses fabric and thread to tell stories, these stories explore my struggles with mental health and the world around me. Embroidery is often a solitary pursuit, sitting and contemplating each stitch as the story unfolds.”*

Mills-Styles' series *Deconstruct/Reconstruct* is an archive of memories, relating scenes from her childhood and the lives of her grandparents. In other pieces, she re-interprets museum objects to tell stories from her life, or catalogues her feelings around depression and anxiety.

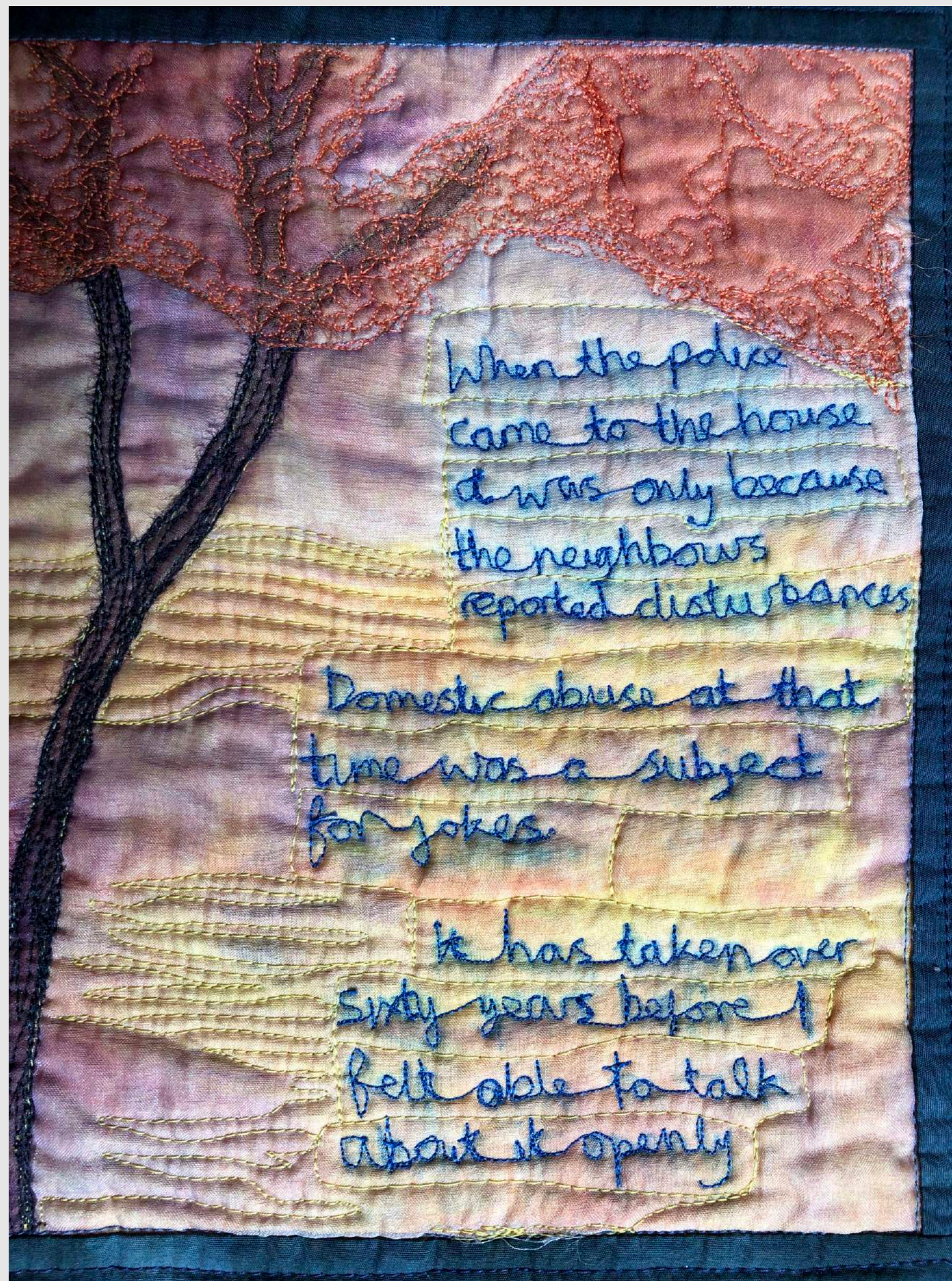


As well as sharing their feelings, Bulwer and Heaton also included details of their earlier lives and family history in their embroidery, both taking particular pride in their education.

All of this is underscored with seething indignation and a powerful sense of injustice. When we read Bulwer and Heaton's embroidered words and learn more of their stories, we can relate to their anger and join them in their outrage.

Sandra Wyman's textile art provokes a similar response. In *Turning Ugly*, she presents viewers with the reality of domestic abuse, from first-hand experience. Like Bulwer and Heaton, she uses text in her work. "The words I'd intended to partially obscure forced their way to the surface", she said. Like those earlier women, Wyman can no longer be silent.





## Sandra Wyman, Turning Ugly (detail), 2014

Hand-dyed cotton, cotton thread

### Image description:

Hand-dyed fabric quilted with mainly horizontal lines. A thin dark tree trunk along the left edge branches into a froth of autumn leaves. Much of the rest of the image is covered with stitched text that looks like handwriting. It reads: When the police came to the house it was only because the neighbours reported disturbances. Domestic abuse at that time was a subject for jokes. It has taken over sixty years before I felt able to talk about it openly.



## Sandra Wyman, Turning Ugly (detail), 2014

Hand-dyed cotton, cotton thread

### Image description:

Close-up detail of swirling lines of thread on hand-dyed fabric, mainly dark blue.



# Confronting injustice

The juxtaposition of soft fabrics and threads with challenging political messages makes for a powerful combination. This is even more pertinent in work that confronts the enduring legacy of colonialism, slavery and exploitation which the UK's textile industry was built on.

Raisa Kabir is an interdisciplinary artist and weaver, concerned with the cultural politics of cloth. She encompasses personal experience and expands the narrative to address wider issues of colonialism and labour. She shows that the violent history of exploitation in the global textile industries continues today. She uses her own body in (un)weaving performances which she describes as a “comment on power, production, disability and the queer brown body as a living archive of collective trauma”.

Disabled people's history of containment, segregation and incarceration is a major cause of this collective, embodied trauma. We are reminded of this when Bulwer tells us she has “wasted ten years in this damnation hell fire”, and that “the English are fools to support workhouses”. In Heaton's embroidery she refers to the “House of correction”, a “national panacea”.





**Raisa Kabir, NO PROTECTION,  
2020-21**

Tufted woollen yarn

Photo: Tiu Makkonen

**Image description:**

Six tufted squares of variegated bright yarn arranged in two rows of three on a white wall. NO PROTECTION is spelled out in block capitals across all the squares, two letters per square. Many threads are left hanging loose and the surfaces are irregular, so the letters are a little blurred. The squares are different colour combinations: black on red and blue, red on yellow and blue, navy on pink and blue and so on.



**Raisa Kabir, Build me a loom off of your back and your stomach..., 2018**

Performance at The Whitworth Gallery, Manchester

Photo: Angela Dennis

**Image description:**

A photograph of the artist sitting on a small rug on the wooden floor of an art gallery, textiles and costume behind glass on the back wall. She is brown-skinned and wears a black sleeveless dress. Her feet are bare, painted red, with ghungroos - dancing bells - round her ankles. She bends over, focused on her feet. Behind her is a large loom, about five feet high and deep, warp threads and rope hanging from it.







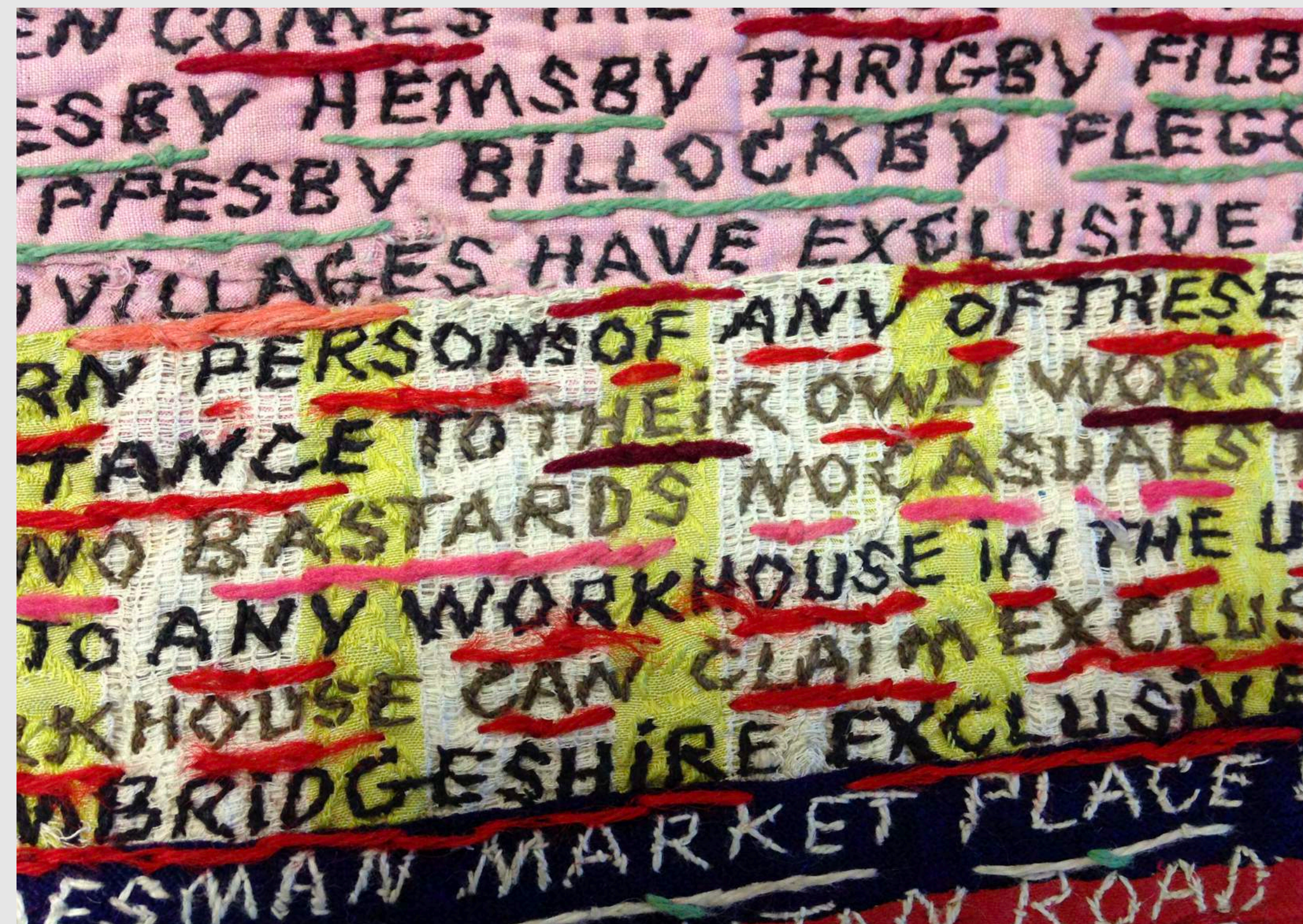
### Mary Heaton, untitled, around 1852

Linen with cotton thread

Photo courtesy of the Mental Health Museum

#### Image description:

Several geometric shapes including circles, rectangles, diamonds applied onto a white background fabric. In the centre is a black coffin shape, with the words '15 or the lustre' embroidered on. Above, a semi-circle is stitched 'Countess of Wilton', then at the bottom, on a red shape, 'House of correction'.



### Lorina Bulwer, Untitled (detail), no date

Woollen yarn on re-used cotton fabric

Photo: Gill Crawshaw

#### Image description:

Different fabrics joined together and densely covered with stitched writing in block capitals. Various Norfolk villages are mentioned: Flegg, Hemsby, Thrigby, Billockby, as is the workhouse. The phrase 'No bastards no casuals' is central.



Kabir, in her work *NO PROTECTION*, “mourn[s] all the times we [queer trans disabled people] were failed by those who were meant to protect us from harm”.

This has taken on even sharper meaning during the pandemic. Despite the public health policy of shielding those vulnerable to infection by restricting them to their homes, and even though the government claimed they had thrown a ‘protective ring’ around care homes, six out of ten Covid deaths in the UK have been disabled people.

Segregation and institutionalisation of disabled people was, and continues to be, traumatic and life-limiting. Disabled artists continue to bring this to wider attention.



# A suitable occupation

Institutional life for detainees in workhouses and asylums was harsh and highly regulated. Needlework, however, was encouraged, even compulsory. Initiatives such as the Barbazon Scheme, established in 1880, aimed to give disabled workhouse and asylum inmates something to do, by introducing knitting, embroidery or lace-making to the women. The scheme was slow to take off, until institutions realised that they could profit from disabled women's work through selling items.

Needlework was used to cultivate femininity amongst asylum and workhouse inmates, and to keep girls and women quiet and orderly. In the face of this, the fact that Mary Heaton and Lorina Bulwer made and kept work that was far removed from the delicate work favoured by workhouse governors is remarkable. Perhaps they hid their work, or maybe their determination meant that they were left alone to get on with it. The value of their work lies in the fact that it is so original and defiant.

Sewing, knitting and needlework remained core activities in hospitals, day centres and schools for disabled people throughout the 20th century. As a form of rehabilitation, or in the absence of real jobs, disabled women were encouraged to knit, sew and weave small items. In schools and residential homes for blind girls, as well as sewing and basket-weaving, pupils were taught to use knitting machines to make socks. Again, the items they made raised funds for the institution.





### **The sewing room at Broadmoor Hospital, 1977**

Photograph reproduced by permission of the Berkshire Record Office and West London Mental Health NHS Trust

#### **Image description:**

Worktables and plastic chairs are arranged along the sides of an institutional room. The tables are covered in rolls of fabric, spools of thread and boxes of sewing tools. A tailor's dummy on the left is modelling a brown hooded cape. Further back, an ironing board and iron are waiting to be used. The room appears productive, despite being empty of people.



### **Sewing class at Elm Court Day School for Delicate Children, 1908**

Photograph reproduced by permission of the London Metropolitan Archives (City of London)

#### **Image description:**

Black and white photograph of a classroom. A small group of girls attend to their sewing. A few of them are sitting in a row one behind the other. They wear white pinafores over dark dresses.



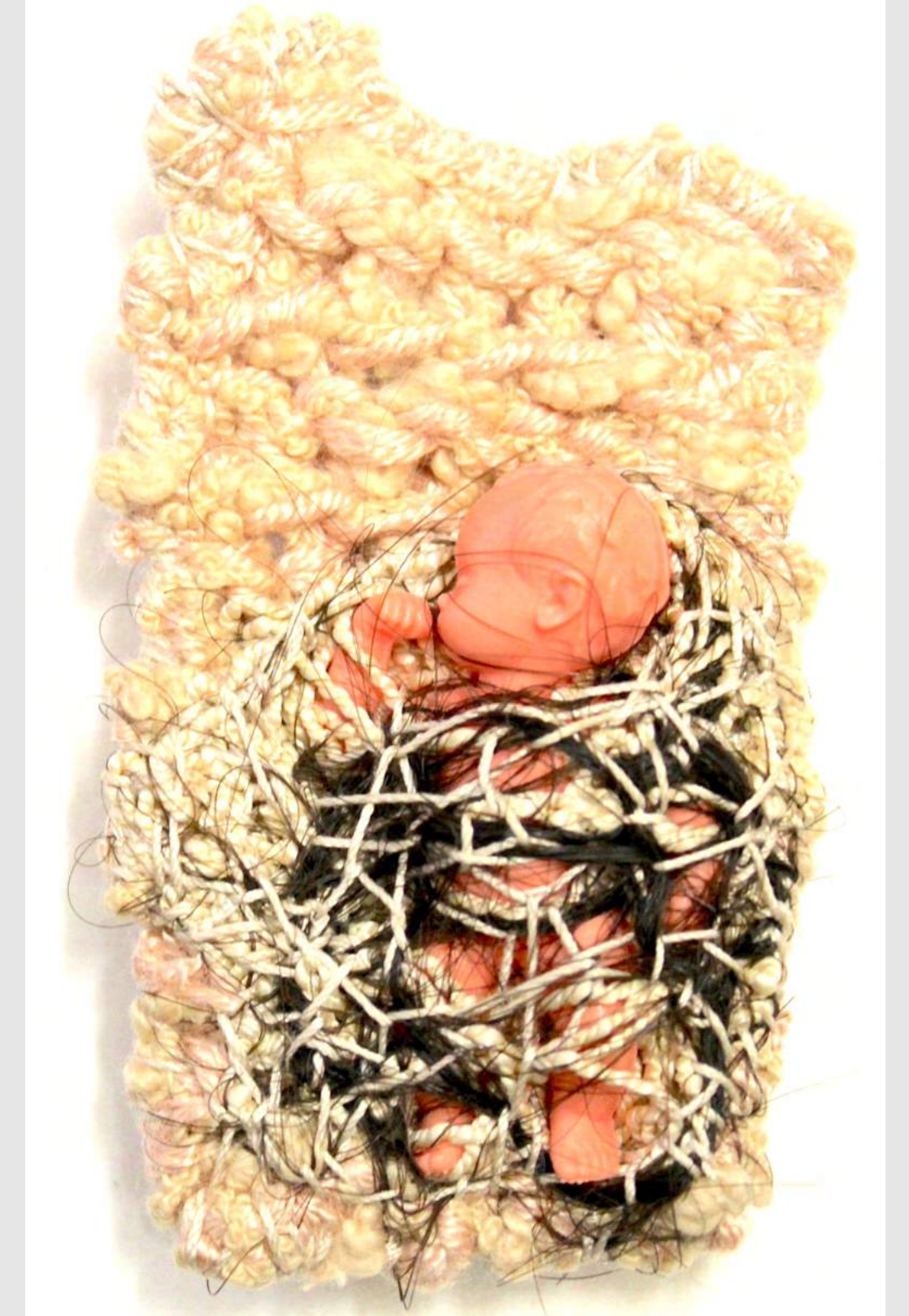


## Judit Wilson, Phoenix, 2020

Found objects, textiles

### Image description:

A fashion doll with broken limbs. Soft, thick yarns and threads are woven tightly around the body. The broken arms and legs remain uncovered, or partially covered. The bottom part of the face, the nose, lips and chin, are uncovered. But the eyes and the rest of the head are covered. The doll is light pink and the threads are bright red. The doll wears a sharp, pointy wooden crown which is woven to the head.



## Judit Wilson, Why do we pass on our vulnerabilities?

### Conversations with Louise Bourgeois, 2021

Crochet, textiles, plastic toy, human hair

### Image description:

An unevenly-knitted, knobbly cream rectangle with a tiny baby doll trapped within, held in place with black and white knotted threads.



# Confounding preconceptions

The needlework produced in institutions and day centres was often highly skilled, but usually followed established patterns and techniques. This legacy often influences people's expectations of the sort of work that contemporary disabled artists produce, particularly those working with textiles. People think the work will not be original, challenging or experimental, but this could not be further from the truth. Like Mary Heaton and Lorina Bulwer, today's disabled women artists use textiles in unexpected ways that confound preconceptions.

Take [Judit Wilson's](#) sculptural artworks. She presents us with surreal juxtapositions that incorporate plastic toys, figures and other found objects. Wilson explores feminist themes as well as psychological subjects, such as the long term, generational effects of women's oppression. Like Bulwer and Heaton, Wilson draws on her life experience, with textiles becoming her voice. "I often feel that I cannot articulate my thoughts or feelings as well verbally as through my textiles", she says.

She ultimately celebrates women's strength, and draws on her own, saying, "I consider myself fortunate that I managed to turn my psychological crisis into a positive transformative experience."



Psychological theories also influence Vivienne Mager's *Maskeraides*. On their own, or in photographs being worn in everyday situations, these knitted masks are designed to be unsettling. They are based on theories of personal revelation and concealment, and their effects on how people behave and are perceived. Mager, like Bulwer and Heaton, is not afraid of making people uncomfortable.

Viewers of [Faye Waple's](#) *Reductivism*, a series of machine-embroidered panels, are often surprised to discover that the ethereal patterns are based on images of her MRI scans. Waple uses her body and brain as her own artistic research.

*“The effect of my diagnosis, rather than limiting my practice, has expanded my perception, understanding, enthusiasm, and knowledge of the symbiotic relationship between art and science.”*

By using abstraction, Waple distances herself emotionally from her subject, in contrast to Bulwer, Heaton and many of the contemporary artists.

They all have something in common, though: they have used textiles to communicate the realities of their lives and to provoke a reaction in the viewer.





## Vivienne Mager, Maskeraides, 2014

Handknitted mixed fibre yarns

Photo: Mat Dale

### Image description:

A line of five hand-knitted masks, each made to cover an entire head with holes left for eyes, mouth and nostrils. They are knitted in different colours with horizontal stripes of varying thickness. Three are mainly brown, one white, one red. Four have heads knitted to points, one or two being particularly pointy. The necks are shaped by ribbing. One has brown stripes of a wispy yarn that gives a hairy effect, and the eye holes are trimmed in blue.



## Vivienne Mager, Man and woman maskeraiding, 2014

Photograph

### Image description:

Two people in a suburban garden, a trellis with greenery behind them. Both wear knitted masks which cover their whole heads, apart from holes for eyes, nostrils and mouths. Otherwise they are conventionally dressed. They are holding hands, one sitting, one standing.





**Faye Waple, Reductivism  
(installation shot), 2014**

Cotton thread on canvas

Photo: Mat Dale

**Image description:**

A grey canvas with several small irregular red and yellow shapes, on a white wall. A person, seen from behind, is looking at this artwork and pointing towards it.

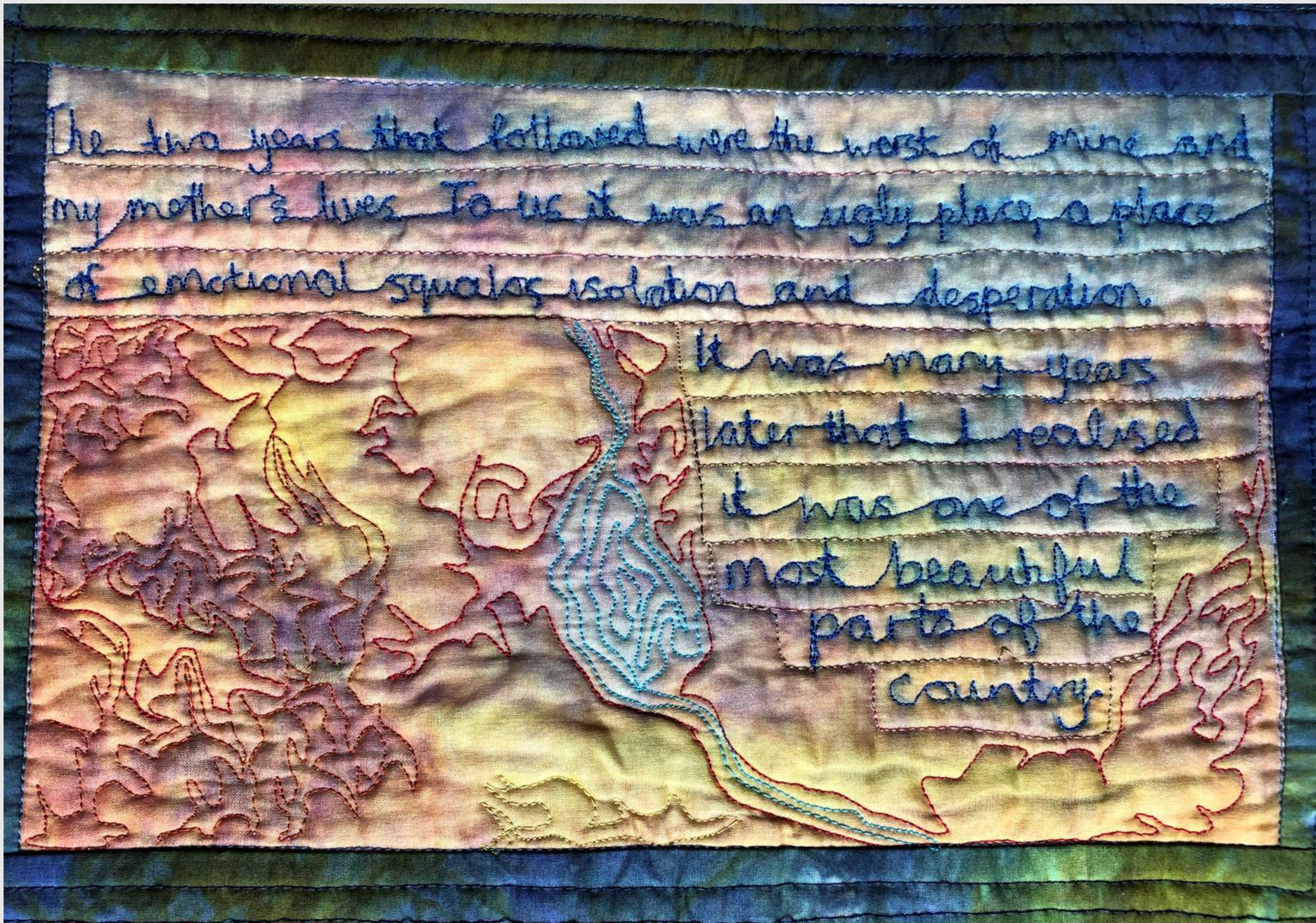


# Conclusion

There is strong connectivity between generations of disabled needleworkers, highlighted by shared practices and approaches to their work. Despite being separated by many decades, common themes of personal histories, narratives of the body, protest, resisting institutional power and fighting inequality run throughout the work. The contemporary artists have repeated and adapted methods such as using text, repurposing fabric and other materials, and most of all, representing strong feelings and opinions.

They are changing perceptions of textile art and of disabled women. Textiles are a vehicle for disabled women to be loud, powerful, confident and even angry and disagreeable. These artists are overturning ideas that disabled women are passive and vulnerable. They are creating work that names and challenges injustice, as Lorina Bulwer and Mary Frances Heaton did before them.





**Sandra Wyman, Turning Ugly (detail), 2014**

Hand-dyed cotton, cotton thread

**Image description:**

Several hand-dyed quilted fabric in pinks, blues and purples. Text is embroidered in lines that fill the top half, giving way to churning lines below. The text reads: The two years that followed were the worst of mine and my mother's lives. To us it was an ugly place, a place of emotional squalor, isolation and desperation. It was many years later that I realised it was one of the most beautiful parts of the country.

**Mary Frances Heaton,  
Patterns for silk  
pocket books from  
1842 to 1846, no date**

Linen with cotton thread

Photo courtesy of the  
Mental Health Museum

**Image description:**

Designs showing both the front and back of three silk envelopes, mainly floral. The title appears at the top, and the sentence 'Offered to the Queen thro the medium of Sir C. Wood' runs down the centre of the sampler, the text turned on its side.





## Image credits:

Thanks to the artists and to the museums and archives that gave permission to include images of their work or from their collections, especially the [Mental Health Museum](#) and the [Thackray Museum of Medicine](#).

All photos of artworks © the artists, unless labelled otherwise.

## More information:

There are several websites that feature the work of Lorina Bulwer and Mary Frances Heaton, here are some of the most informative.

Lorina Bulwer:

- + [thackrayhealthheroes.co.uk/thackray-stories/lorina-bulwer-highlighting-stitching-for-wellbeing](http://thackrayhealthheroes.co.uk/thackray-stories/lorina-bulwer-highlighting-stitching-for-wellbeing)
- + [museums.norfolk.gov.uk/gressenhall-farm-and-workhouse/whats-here/online-resources/lorina](http://museums.norfolk.gov.uk/gressenhall-farm-and-workhouse/whats-here/online-resources/lorina)
- + [shoddyexhibition.wordpress.com/2016/10/28/lorina-mind-fast-method-slow/](http://shoddyexhibition.wordpress.com/2016/10/28/lorina-mind-fast-method-slow/)

Mary Frances Heaton:

- + [artscafeevents.org/mary-frances-heaton](http://artscafeevents.org/mary-frances-heaton)
- + [forgottenwomenwake.com/our-women/mary-frances-heaton/](http://forgottenwomenwake.com/our-women/mary-frances-heaton/)

## About the author:

Gill Crawshaw is a curator and draws on her experience of disability activism to organise art exhibitions and events which highlight issues affecting disabled people. She is interested in the intersection of disabled people's lives with textile heritage in the north of England, as well as contemporary textile arts.

- + [shoddyexhibition.wordpress.com/](http://shoddyexhibition.wordpress.com/)
- + [gill.crawshaw@gmail.com](mailto:gill.crawshaw@gmail.com)





This essay is one of [Disability Arts Online's Covid Commissions 2021](#)

It is available in audio and easy-read formats.

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Design by alabamathirteen

Background Image: Raisa Kabir, NO PROTECTION (detail), 2020-21. Tufted woollen yarn  
Photo: Tiu Makkonen

Image description: Close-up view of vivid red tufted panel. There are a few blue patches. Some uncut yarns in pink and blue hang loose and longer against the red.

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